



Press Clipping Article

Title: Farmers hope for federal relief after temps hit crops

Date: 04/19/2007

Source: [Bowling Green Daily News](#)

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Lead:

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Regional farmers are hoping for federal relief in the face of what has been characterized as the most devastating crop loss of their lifetimes.

Gov. Ernie Fletcher and state politicians are petitioning for disaster assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for state farmers after extremely cold temperatures April 5-10.

In a letter to the USDA, Rep. Rob Wilkey, D-Scottsville, asked for Kentucky to be designated as an agricultural disaster area.

"I think it's the worst farm disaster, including drought, that I have ever seen in my lifetime," Wilkey said. "We have a lot of farmers in our area that are facing what can only be called financial ruin."

He said he expects a response from the USDA within 30 days.

Sen. Richie Sanders, R-Franklin, who was in the process of drafting a similar letter, said he's heard that 75 percent of the corn crop has already been planted and the majority of the wheat is damaged.

Agriculture plays a big role in the local economy, he said - Simpson County is one of the leading soybean-producing counties in the state.

Chris Kummer, president of Kentucky Specialty Grains, an investment group seeking to build a soybean processing plant in Simpson County, said the weather might have put a freeze on farmers' investment funds in the plant.

"It can't help it because of lot of potential investment money was just taken out of the system. That was the profit that was destroyed," he said.

Kummer, a soybean, corn and wheat farmer, said his lost revenue is in the tens of thousands and estimated 90 percent of Simpson County's farmers have been affected.

He said about half the crops on his 500-acre farm were destroyed, and the yield potential is limited on the remaining portion.

The freeze was particularly crippling to crops because it followed three weeks of record highs, causing everything to grow sooner and faster, he said.

“It exaggerated the cold,” Kummer added. “We had May-like temperatures in March.”

The damage might not be a “fatal blow” to farmers who might be in good financial shape due to three previous good growing seasons.

Scott Jones of Russellville, part owner of Wheat Tech, an agricultural consulting firm with clients in Kentucky, Tennessee and Missouri, said farmers are a “very resilient group” and the ability to rebound is there.

He estimated that 75 percent to 80 percent of the wheat in southcentral Kentucky is likely unsalvageable. However, Jones advised farmers to be patient in evaluating their crops as the weather warms again.

With corn, anything planted before March 28 needs to be examined, he said, because there's been re-growth in the last few days.

“You may be able to replant,” Jones said.

Also, soybeans haven't been planted yet, so the capability of early planting of the soybean crop could help make up some of the difference in wheat and corn loss, he said.

Bill Clary, spokesman for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, said crop loss statewide is more than \$45 million; the governor's office determined there was enough affected area to meet USDA's disaster-area requirements.

The freeze is part of a system that affected the entire eastern United States, so “given the severity of it from a national standpoint, we would expect a decision (on relief funds) to be made sooner rather than later,” Clary said.

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